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THE FOREST PEOPLE OF BRITISH GUIANA.

BY

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I.—THE BOVIANDERS.

In journeying up the principal rivers of British Guiana a stranger is struck by the almost total absence of anything beyond the wall of vegetation on either hand. Hardly a habitation of any kind is to be seen for miles. If, however, he looks closely at the banks he will see here and there under the bushes a canoe or bateau, and if he goes closer will find a small opening. Here, if the water is low, will be seen a cylindrical log lying on the mud; this is the landing-stage of the boviander, one of the people living "above yonder," away from the coast and its population. If he can get ashore by means of such a slippery wharf he will find a narrow muddy path, at the termination of which is a tiny hut thatched with palm leaves.

The bovianders are of all shades. Whites, Indians, negroes, and even Chinese are to be found among them, but by far the majority are mixed in such a way that there are no names to distinguish them. Some are descended from connections of Dutch planters and Indian or negro slaves, others from the offspring of Africans and Indians, a few, no doubt, from bush negroes. Nominally they are timber-cutters, charcoal-burners, and provision-growers, but they only work when in the humour, and that is not very often. As, however, their wants are few they manage to live after a fashion.

Under the influence of their surroundings they have become silent and reserved, like the Indians, and, like them, are at home on the river or in the forest, rather than in towns and villages. Even when they are to all appearance pure negroes they have less of that noisy, boisterous manner so conspicuous elsewhere. Taken altogether they are agreeable, and quite hospitably inclined, as far as their means allow. As in the case of the Indian's home, you may make yourself quite free with the hut of the boviander. You are welcome to everything he has, which is generally nothing that you are likely to want.

My first trip up the Demerara river was taken in company with an old man, who might have been a mulatto, judging by the colour

of his skin. His crisp, grizzled hair was drawn up from his forehead to form an elevation; possibly "the cockatoo fashion" that prevailed in the early years of the century.

He called for me a little after midnight, and with the quiet remark, "Water wash a'ready, sir," prepared to carry my baggage to the stelling (wharf). Arrived there I saw a small bateau lying on the mud with its farthest end washed by the rising tide. It did not take long to stow ourselves and the impedimenta; then, with a push of the paddle, we floated into the open river.

The moon was overhead, throwing its pale light on the harbour and shipping, and as we floated lazily past the wharves I thought of the name Rio De Mirara, found on some old maps. It was strange to me; perhaps it might be wonderful. Once its banks were lined with plantations for nearly a hundred miles. The stolid Hollander, the enterprising Scotchman, the Huguenot refugee, and possibly some descendants of transported Jacobites from Barbados, superintended the clearing of the virgin forest by their slaves. They erected horse and water mills to grind their canes, drove their negroes into the field with the whip, and were as rough a set as are pioneers in any new country.

Now nature has resumed her rights, only opposed by a few weak bovianders. The dark line of bush we were passing was not virgin forest, for it had lost its best timber trees, but it was none the less dense on that account. Even in the moonlight I could see clumps of bamboos, the original stock of which was brought from the East Indies two centuries ago.

Vainly I attempted to distinguish the trees as we passed. Near the shore the hum of insect life was quite loud; farther out in the river it was subdued or lost altogether. Now and again came a whiff of what I afterwards well knew to be the reek of the forest, reminding me of the Kew palm house in winter. Then came the perfume of some night bloomer, whether near or far it was impossible to say.

Slowly we floated along, my "Captain" only steering the craft. Once or twice I tried to learn something from him of the plants and animals of the forest, but he could tell me little beyond what I knew already. Now I would doze off for a few minutes and wake to wonder where I was. But whether we were passing "Golden Grove," "Garden of Eden," or "Land of Canaan" the same dark line of forest met my eyes. Off Borssele Island I thought of the time when the Demerara public offices stood here, and of the fear of pirates which led the early settlers to go so far inland. It was

here that in 1781, when Georgetown was unthought of, the Honourables met to consider the advent of some Bristol privateers and the answer that should be given to their demands. Now the island was covered with jungle, and the tombs of the Councillors are mostly lost in the second-growth forest.

As dawn appeared the birds awoke. From a silk-cotton tree, decked with hanging nests, came a flock of bonyas, and here and there a toucan's puppy-like bark could be heard. Then there were sounds that I did not recognize, mingled with one quite familiar—Cock-a-doodle-doo! Yes, behind this thicket were boviander huts, and the domestic cock greeted the morn like the others.

Now a few signs of human life began to appear. From the different landings came the bovianders in their craft—punts worked slowly with long sweeps by two men, bateaus of all sizes, and dug-out canoes. Every one had a hearty "Good morning" for my "Captain," and remarks were freely passed as to the destination of the buccra. Here would be a little boy or girl in a great clumsy bateau, and there almost a baby sweeping a craft more fitted to its size. But whether little or big—man or child—all were quite at home on the water. Perhaps the little one could have no breakfast until she had gone to the shop three or four miles away to spend the penny or twopence just given her by father. Poor children! I was inclined to pity them until I heard their "Good morning, sah," and saw how happy they appeared. No matter that they had hardly enough clothes to cover their nakedness, and that they often passed the whole day without a meal, they were still merry.

As the sun appeared above the forest my "Captain" steered the bateau into a little opening, and I saw before me a chained log for a landing-stage. With the assistance of a paddle I managed to get ashore to meet a welcome from Miss Boviander and her mother.

Before me was a muddy footpath lined with long grasses and weeds, dripping with the heavy dew, terminating in the usual troolie* hut. Looking round I saw that there was a fair number of fruit trees, such as oranges, lemons, starapples, and breadfruit, but all were so choked by weeds and scrambling vines that only one or two were bearing. However, I was interested even in the weeds, for they differed from those of the coast lands.

My baggage was soon brought into the hut, and I sat down on the only piece of furniture—a kerosene box—until my hammock was slung. Consisting of six upright sticks to support the troolie

* Palm-leaf.

thatch, this boviander home was divided into two rooms—quite a luxury as compared with the open benab or shed. But, unfortunately, while the Indian's hut is usually spacious and open, that of the boviander is low, with thatched sides and partitions, except in front. Again, the Indian generally secures an elevation for his settlement; the other chooses the low ground on the banks of the rivers.

However, I had provided myself with quinine and chlorodyne, and troubled very little about the position. The novelty alone excited me, and when I had eaten a good breakfast—from my own trunk, of course—I felt quite comfortable. Still, I could do little that day beyond botanising round the hut; after that I slung my hammock between two trees and made up for last night's vigil by a refreshing sleep.

In the afternoon some neighbours came in bateaus, and after a little talk with them I went to see the notables of the village. There was actually a shop some half a mile away, kept by a Chinaman, who invited me to take a cup of tea! This I rather enjoyed, although it was cold and without the usual accessories. Then I visited the parson or catechist, who, no doubt, thought himself somebody. Perhaps the most important after all was the boat-builder, for his trade is the only one of any importance on the river. Everything save the bateau can be procured easily enough, and the river man must have a craft of some sort, which, as a rule, he cannot make himself.

Coming back to my lodging, I had a little time to look round. Mrs. Boviander was apparently of Indian descent, with traces of white and negro blood. She seemed to be always standing over the fire, cooking something or other, and very rarely spoke. Her daughter, however, was quite lively, and always ready to do anything that lay in her power for the stranger. There was a naked baby sometimes crawling upon the earthen floor or, when asleep, stowed away in a box. At first I wondered who were his parents, but this was soon settled by my host's daughter suckling him in my presence.

The young mother was darker than either of her parents, and might be taken for a cob (the offspring of a mulatto and a negro), but the baby looked to be almost pure Indian. No doubt the general desire for fair children, so common among negroes, was responsible for this brown lump of humanity. Of course, Miss Boviander was not married; nor do I suppose that half the people along the banks of the river have ever gone through the ceremony.

Towards afternoon a young fellow, whom my host introduced as his son, came in with his Indian wife. They lived up the creek, and appeared very glad to see the stranger, for whom they brought a joint of labba* meat. Mrs. Boviander, Junior, wore a plain print frock like a loose dressing-gown; probably this was her whole dress, judging by the way it hung.

As night fell I brought out my candles, and we sat in our hammocks for a cosy chat. The old man was a little more talkative than he had been the previous night, and I learnt something of his inner feelings. Of course, he was shy and hard to draw out; but as I pressed one question after another his reserve broke down.

It was interesting to note how the superstitions of Africa and America had been blended with those of Europe. There was the mermaid or water-mamma, who lived in a deep place up the creek, and drew under water all who ventured to bathe near her habitation. Possibly the siren of the ancients had been confounded with the manatee, and this again with some Congo deity. Then he told some "Nancy stories," reminding me of "Brer' Rabbit." Anansy was a great demon spider, possibly suggested by the great hairy creatures of the tropics, and all his tricks were attempts at over-reaching other animals and man. It is noticeable that half-civilized races, like the negroes, always admire smartness entirely apart from its morality. A clever ruse by which a rogue escapes from his deserts is thoroughly enjoyed by them, and I have seen a little crowd clap their hands and cheer at seeing a rogue get away from a policeman.

Mr. Boviander's interest in the forest consisted mainly in timber trees, and especially greenheart, mora, and wallaba. There were very few of the two first in the neighbourhood; they had all been cut down long ago, unless they were old and decayed or too young. He remembered when timber-cutting paid well; now the good times were gone. It was the old story—the best time, even here in the Guiana forest, is long past.

He could not hunt, for he had no dog. Good hunting dogs were very scarce, and even here the Government license stood in the way of raising them. And then the training was hard work; only Indians could do it properly. Not every dog could be made suitable for deer or labba, and if he were to pay for several until he found one to suit it would be very hard.

In reply to my questions as to wild beasts, he said there was now and then a tiger (jaguar), and plenty of snakes. Few people,

* A kind of guinea-pig.

however, were bitten by snakes, but they were very destructive to domestic fowls. There were no vampire bats near by, but farther up the river you could hardly sleep in the open without the risk of their sucking your feet.

The dangers of the forests consisted—to him—rather in the unknown creatures than in those familiar. There was the Didi and the Akreo, two types of the wild man of the woods. If you came across one of these, you must not look at him, or something very bad would happen. He had once seen the Didi peeping through the fork of a tree, and ran away as fast as he could. Perhaps it was a baboon or howling monkey, the nondescript of Charles Waterton, but my host would not admit such an idea. He had shot and eaten baboons often enough; to suppose that he did not know one of them was almost an insult.

But beyond everything else in the bush, the most fearful is the Kenaima. He was related to the Indians himself, but those were Arawaks—the Kenaimas were Acawoios. A boviander friend, living far up the river, once wronged one of these people, with the result that the avenger of blood came upon his track as a tiger Kenaima. His body blotched like that of the jaguar, he followed the man from place to place until the opportunity for vengeance occurred. The boviander stole a light canoe and hurried down the river, hardly giving himself time to sleep. He was so exhausted, however, on reaching this house that he came in and begged my host to hide him for a few hours. Terribly frightened as he was, Mr. Boviander could not refuse, but he was much relieved when his friend left. A few hours later he was horrified to see a pair of eyes staring from the bush, but soon finding that his prey had escaped, the avenger went on to Georgetown.

The refugee could do little in Georgetown, and, as he had no friends, was soon almost starving. For some petty theft he was sent to jail for a month, and was thus safe for that time. But the Kenaima remained in the neighbourhood, living somehow or other, until his victim was released, and could get a passage to Essequibo with some woodcutters. Several months passed, during which the boviander dared not remain alone for a minute, for he knew that there could be no chance of his escape if the Indian once got hold of him. At last the opportunity arrived, the human tiger sprung upon his victim, the heavy club broke his skull, and all was over!

(*To be continued.*)